



PLA UPDATE

A monthly newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the PLA

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Welcome to the sixth issue of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA’s newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Each edition of this newsletter draws on the expertise of CNA’s China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division to gather information and provide an update on important developments in the PLA as reported in the Chinese- and English-language media of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The PRC and the PLA have been busy this summer—and not just because of Beijing’s public, diplomatic, and military responses to US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi’s August 2–4 visit to Taiwan. The ramifications of Speaker Pelosi’s visit, covered extensively in other publications (including analysis by CNA’s Mike McDevitt published in [CNA’s blog *In Depth*](#)), is not the focus of this issue of *PLA UPDATE*.¹ Rather, this issue reviews topics of consequence to the PLA that have been less well covered by media outside the PRC, including newly promulgated Central Military Commission (CMC) guidelines on non-war military activities, a series of *PLA Daily* commentaries on a compilation of Xi Jinping’s speeches about strengthening the military, and China’s participation in the Russian-led exercise Vostok 2022.

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MAJOR EXERCISES

TROOPS FROM 3 PLA SERVICES JOIN RUSSIAN EXERCISE VOSTOK 2022

PLA troops have conducted their first major exercise alongside Russian forces since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. According to China Military Online, from August 31 to September 7, approximately 2,000 personnel from the PLA Army, Navy, and Air Force [participated](#) in Vostok 2022. According to PRC and Russian government spokespersons, this Russian-led exercise featured over 50,000 troops and more than 5,000 weapons and pieces of equipment from 14 countries' armed forces.² These numbers may have been exaggerated; for example, the UK Ministry of Defense [asserted](#) that the actual number of participating troops in this year's Vostok was likely much smaller.³

Vostok (Russian for "East") is one of four regional [strategic command staff exercises](#) that culminate the Russian military's annual training cycle. These exercises rotate annually across four of Russia's five military districts.⁴ The PLA has participated in the past four iterations of Russia's strategic command staff exercises, namely Vostok 2018, Tsentr ("Central") 2019, Kavkaz ("South") 2020, and Zapad ("West") 2021.⁵



PLA participants at the closing ceremony of Vostok 2022.
Source: China Military Online.

Vostok 2022 was held in various locations throughout the Russian Far East and in the Sea of Japan (including sites in the Kuril Islands claimed by both Russia and Japan). The exercise culminated with a [live-fire exercise](#) (LFX) on September 6, which Russian President Vladimir Putin observed in person. In a ground component of the LFX, PLA Army personnel operating ZTZ-99 main battle tanks, ZBD-04A infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), and PLZ-07A 122 mm self-propelled howitzers cooperated with unspecified "foreign counterparts" to

defeat a mock enemy with "intensive fire strikes." Meanwhile, in the Sea of Japan, three PLA Navy ships (a destroyer, frigate, and replenishment ship) conducted drills with foreign counterparts on simulated missile attacks and artillery strikes against a "mock enemy's landing force."⁶

PRC media highlighted that Vostok 2022 was the [first time](#) the PLA had sent units from three services to concurrently participate in a Russian strategic command staff exercise.⁷ Not mentioned in related reporting, however, was the fact that this iteration of Vostok was significantly smaller than Vostok 2018 in the numbers of both PRC participants and overall participants. The 2018 iteration reportedly featured about six times as many personnel (300,000), with roughly 3,000 coming from the PLA.⁸

PRC government spokespersons and media asserted that China's participation in the exercise was not a sign of support for Russia's ongoing military operations in Ukraine. A PRC Ministry of National Defense (MND) spokesperson [claimed](#) that the PLA's participation in Vostok 2022 was "unrelated to the current international and regional situation" and intended to deepen military cooperation with all participating countries.⁹ PRC media reports also [criticized](#) Western media for speculating that the PLA's involvement in the exercise demonstrated support for the Russia-Ukraine war, arguing that Western observers had failed to notice the other countries participating in Vostok 2022.¹⁰ This emphasis in the PRC's public portrayal of the exercise may reflect an effort by Beijing to calibrate signs of support for Russia's military at a time when the outcome of the war remains uncertain.

For more analysis on China-Russia defense relations and the broader bilateral partnership, see this recent Russia Matters [article](#) by CNA's Liz Wishnick.¹¹

SENIOR LEADERSHIP GUIDANCE

LIGHT PRC MEDIA COVERAGE OF AUGUST 1 PLA DAY ACTIVITIES

PRC media coverage of the 95th anniversary of the PLA's founding on August 1, 1927, coincided with a large-scale PRC propaganda campaign against US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. In recent years, PRC media have issued various and detailed reports on the PLA's celebratory and commemorative activities in the days leading up to and during August 1 (also known as PLA Day or Army Day). The reporting on the holiday in 2022, however, was uncharacteristically sparse. No rank promotion ceremonies were reported in the several days leading up to August 1, and the only significant key leader statement on China's armed forces published during the period was a speech reprinted from five years ago (see below). The absence of detail on this year's August 1 festivities may be attributable in part to the concurrent large-scale propaganda campaign waged by PRC government [spokespersons](#) and state media that warned of a forceful PRC response should Speaker Pelosi visit Taiwan. (Speaker Pelosi arrived on the island on August 2.)¹²

PRC media's light reporting on the 95th anniversary of the PLA's founding included the following:

1. On July 31, *Qiushi*, the Chinese Communist Party Central Party School's official theoretical journal, republished a speech Xi Jinping delivered on the PLA's 90th anniversary in 2017. The journal did not explain why it republished the speech.¹³
2. *PLA Daily* reported that CCP leadership attended a reception celebrating the PLA's 95th anniversary but provided little information aside from the names of leaders who attended.¹⁴
3. *PLA Daily* also published a lengthy paean on the PLA's historical development authored by "Xie Xinping," a pseudonym used by the *PLA Daily* in the context of commentary on military reform issues. The article focused largely on recounting key events in early PLA history and praised the leadership of Mao Zedong and the young soldiers who sacrificed their lives on past battlefields.¹⁵

PLA COMMENTARIES PRAISE LATEST VOLUME OF XI JINPING'S SPEECHES

Authors from CCP research organizations within the PLA have penned commentaries lauding various aspects of a book of Xi's speeches from the past two years. On June 30, Foreign Languages Press, a publishing house run by the CCP Central Propaganda Department, [released](#) the fourth volume of *The Governance of China*.¹⁶ This latest addition to the [series](#), which compiles select written and spoken works by Xi Jinping, covers the period of February 3, 2020, to May 10, 2022.¹⁷ Since the fourth volume's release, PRC media have published a number of commentaries by PLA personnel, including the following:

- July 22: Zhao Wentao et al. of the PLA National Defense University's Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era Research Center claimed that Xi's new volume represented the pinnacle of recent advances in [Marxism theory](#) and should be earnestly studied.¹⁸
- August 15: Fan Weiwei and Wu Diming of the PLA Navy's Party Innovative Theory Research Center emphasized the importance of studying the book's teachings on Marxism and continually advancing the [self-revolution](#) of the CCP.¹⁹
- September 7: Li Yucheng and Yan Xu of the PLA National Defense University's Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era Research Center discussed content in the volume related to building China into a great "[cultural power](#)."²⁰

An August 6 [circular](#) issued by the CMC General Office mandated that studies of the fourth volume of *The Governance of China* be organized and implemented throughout the PLA and People's Armed Police.²¹

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

PLA ISSUES NEW GUIDELINES ON NON-WAR MILITARY ACTIVITIES

The PLA has issued new guidelines on the conduct of various military activities that exist outside the scope of armed conflict. On July 13, Xinhua News Agency [reported](#) that Xi Jinping, in his role as Chairman of the CMC, signed an order to issue a trial version of new guidelines on non-war military activities (NWMA)—also known as “military operations other than war”—that would take effect on July 15.²² Although not specified in Xinhua’s reporting, NWMA (as defined in PLA writings) consists of military operations such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), maritime rights protection, and the suppression of domestic unrest.²³

The new NWMA guidelines, which have not been made public, reportedly feature sections on organization and command, types of activities, support for activities, and political work for NWMA. The guidelines are said to offer “a legal foundation for units conducting NWMA.”²⁴

At a June 30 press conference, a PRC MND spokesperson [said](#) the new guidelines are “of great importance” and have expansive aims. According to the spokesperson, these aims include to “effectively prevent and defuse risks and challenges, cope with emergencies, protect people’s life and property, safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interests, maintain regional and world peace and stability, innovate the way the armed forces are employed, and standardize the organization and execution of [NWMA].”²⁵

The timing of the release of the guidelines, along with the scope of activities under the PLA’s conception of NWMA (particularly those focused on stemming domestic unrest), led to speculation among some outside observers that the document had implications for a Taiwan contingency. The guidelines were released only three days after the PRC defense minister said at the Shangri-La Dialogue that the PLA would “definitely not hesitate to start a war no matter the cost” should anyone seek to separate Taiwan from China.²⁶ Furthermore, PRC subject matter experts quoted in the [South China Morning Post](#) did little to dissuade observers from asserting that the NWMA guidelines were released with Taiwan in mind. Even while claiming that the new guidelines were “not aimed at providing legal support for a Taiwan contingency,” Ni Lexiong of the Shanghai University of Political Science and Law stated that the guidelines were “intended as a political deterrence to any forces which aim to destabilize domestic social, economic and political order” and that they would “remind some hostile forces that they will face severe consequences if they want to challenge the legitimacy of the party.”²⁷

PLA PROMOTIONS AND HONORS

NEWLY APPOINTED NTC COMMANDER PROMOTED TO 3-STAR GENERAL



Source: China Military Online.

On September 8, the PLA Northern Theater Command (NTC) commander was promoted to the rank of three-star general, the PLA’s highest military rank. PLA Air Force General Wang Qiang, who only recently was appointed NTC commander, was the only individual to receive a rank promotion at a [ceremony](#) presided over by Xi Jinping and other CMC leaders.²⁸ PRC media did not specify the date when Wang assumed his command, but it likely occurred shortly before the promotion ceremony. Wang’s predecessor, General Li Qiaoming, was identified as NTC commander at a public [event](#) as late as August 1.²⁹ Wang’s previous appointments were in the Western Theater Command (WTC). In 2016, he was named WTC chief

of staff and was later promoted to serve concurrently as both WTC deputy commander and WTC Air Force commander.³⁰

XI JINPING PRESENTS PLA'S HIGHEST HONOR TO THREE RECIPIENTS

On July 27, Xi Jinping presented the August 1 Medal, the highest honor in the Chinese military, to three recipients. Those receiving the [honor](#) were recognized for achievements in defending PRC interests and advancing PLA modernization.³¹ An [article](#) appearing on China Military Online included the following biographical information on the August 1 Medal recipients:

- Du Fuguo, a 31-year-old former demining soldier in the PLA who lost his hands and eyes in 2018 while protecting fellow soldiers from an explosion in a land mine clearance operation in Yunnan Province. He has previously received the honorary titles "Role Model of Our Times" and "Heroic Demining Soldier."
- Qian Qihu, an 85-year-old academician at the Chinese Academy of Engineering who set up a theoretical system for China's modern defense engineering and contributed to the creation of an underground defense infrastructure.
- Nie Haisheng, the 58-year-old commander of the June 2021 Shenzhou-12 manned spaceflight mission who was one of the first to stay on China's space station for a period of three months.³²



Source: Xinhua.

As we discussed in our [March](#) and [May](#) 2022 newsletters, the August 1 Medal is part of the PLA's implementation of recent revisions to its military awards system. According to a February 2022 China Military Online [article](#), improvements to this system have enhanced "the attractiveness of military careers and the sense of mission and honor of the military personnel in China."³³

WEAPONS TESTS AND EMERGING CAPABILITIES

PRC REPORTS 6TH LAND-BASED MISSILE INTERCEPT TEST SINCE 2010

The PRC Defense Ministry announced that China successfully completed a land-based mid-course missile interception test within its territory on June 19. The ministry provided no details aside from [stating](#) that the test was "defensive in nature" and "not targeted against any country."³⁴ This was the sixth missile interception test announced by the PRC since 2010 (the previous five were announced in 2010, 2013, 2014, 2018, and 2021). PRC media noted that all but the 2014 test had previously been characterized by the PRC government as mid-course missile interception tests (the phase of the 2014 test was not specified).³⁵

Although the PRC Defense Ministry's statement on the sixth test was a terse two sentences, PRC media portrayed the test as a step forward in China's development of capabilities to defend against an adversary's first strike and protect China's nuclear deterrent capability. An unnamed military expert speaking to the *Global Times* [said](#) the successful sixth test underscored the growing reliability of China's antiballistic missile capability and would "serve as a deterrent against nuclear blackmail."³⁶ Wang Ya'nan, editor in chief of the Beijing-based magazine *Aerospace Knowledge*, [described](#) China's developments in both "spear" and "shield" capabilities as important in light of potential future US intermediate-range missile deployments in Asia.

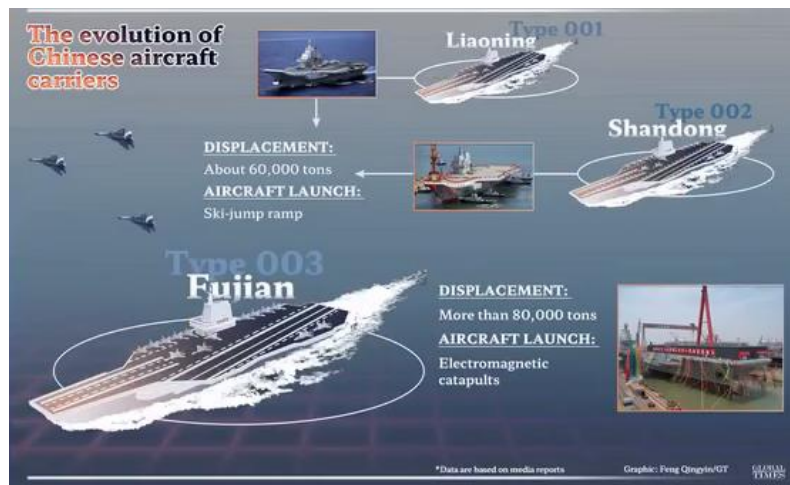
According to Wang, in a time of need, China should be able to use “long-range strike capabilities” to destroy US missile positions (the sword) and missile defense systems to “intercept those that have made [it] into the air” (the shield).³⁷ An [article](#) posted on China Military Online stated that China’s mid-course missile intercept capability could be used against ballistic missiles or “new threats” such as hypersonic aircraft and that it would be “iteratively upgraded based on real threats.”³⁸

PLA NAVY

CHINA LAUNCHES THIRD AND MOST ADVANCED AIRCRAFT CARRIER

On June 17, the PLA Navy launched CNS *Fujian* (CV-18), its third aircraft carrier to date and its first to be equipped with an electromagnetic catapult system. With the 80,000-ton CNS *Fujian*’s launch from Jiangnan Shipyard in Shanghai, China became the second-largest aircraft carrier (CV) operator in the world (passing the UK and France, which both possess two, but still well behind the US, which operates 11 CVs).³⁹

The most noteworthy technical feature of CNS *Fujian* is its [electromagnetic catapult system](#), a significant capability upgrade from the steam catapult launchers on China’s other two carriers, CNS *Liaoning* (CV-16) and CNS *Shandong* (CV-17). Compared to the “ski ramp” design of CV-16 and CV-17, the three electromagnetic catapults on CNS *Fujian* will enable faster launches of more diverse aircraft carrying heavier loads, such as the KJ-600 airborne early warning and control aircraft and larger carrier onboard delivery aircraft.⁴¹ *China Daily* reported that CV-18 is expected to carry a catapult-capable variant of the J-15 fighter jet—the mainstay of PLA Navy carrier battle groups—as well as “new advanced combat planes or drones.”⁴²



Graphic comparing displacements and aircraft launch capabilities of the PLA Navy’s first two aircraft carriers and its third carrier, CNS *Fujian*. Source: *Global Times*.⁴⁰

CNS *Fujian* bears some similarities to the US Navy’s most advanced aircraft carrier, USS *Gerald R. Ford*, though the Chinese carrier is smaller, has fewer electromagnetic catapults, and is conventionally powered—making it more dependent on shore- or sea-based support. (USS *Gerald R. Ford* displaces about 100,000 tons, features four electromagnetic catapults, and is nuclear powered.)⁴³

PRC government and military spokespersons have offered few details on future milestones for CNS *Fujian* or the PLA Navy’s carrier program as a whole. In an information release at the time of CNS *Fujian*’s launch, a PLA Navy spokesperson declined to offer any specifics on the carrier’s future home port or timelines for its sea trials and commissioning.⁴⁴ (A report published by the Office of the Secretary of Defense estimates that the carrier will be “operational” by 2024.)⁴⁵ When asked whether China intended to build more carriers like CNS *Fujian*, a PRC Defense Ministry [spokesperson](#), avoiding a direct answer, said the PRC would “make comprehensive consideration[s] according to the needs of national security and the development of equipment and technology.”⁴⁶

The absence of detailed official statements on the future direction of China's carrier program has not stopped speculation from less authoritative media. As early as 2019, *South China Morning Post*, citing "experts," has [claimed](#) Beijing seeks to have six aircraft carriers (four nuclear-powered) by 2035.⁴⁷ Addressing possible operational applications of CNS *Fujian*, one expert quoted in the *South China Morning Post* said the carrier may "be used to project Chinese power in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean" but would have less practical value in a conflict with Taiwan, since the PLA "already has plenty of airfields to achieve air superiority over the island."⁴⁸ *Global Times*, in [contrast](#), said some "netizens" believe CNS *Fujian* could "play an important role" in addressing "the Taiwan question," noting that the carrier was named after the southeastern mainland province directly across from Taiwan.⁴⁹

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¹² For example, on July 28, a PRC MFA spokesperson, echoing remarks made two days earlier by a PRC MND spokesperson, said that if the US Speaker of the House insisted on visiting Taiwan, "the Chinese military will never sit idly by" and would "certainly take strong and resolute measures" in response. See "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on July 28, 2022," PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 28, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202207/t20220728_10729508.html.

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